ADVERSARY POLITICS AND LAND

The conflict over land and property policy in post-war Britain

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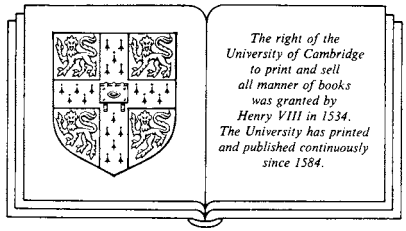

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There is a central debate in the social sciences about the concept of power which is linked directly to notions about how best to study and analyse public policy-making. Within this debate about the scope for the use of *political power* in advanced capitalist societies, some theorists argue that the government is capable of doing anything it chooses as long as it retains the support of the electorate and is responsive to the demands made upon it by competing interests in society. Other writers have argued that only a few actors in government and society actually wield the influence to shape key decisions and this limits the ability of the holders of political power to initiate policies which they desire. At another level some writers have contended that, while there may be some mobilisation of bias against radically reforming governments, in practice the government does possess an ability to shape its own policies, but that this ability is constrained by other centres of power in economy and society outside the narrowly circumscribed political decision-making process.[1]

The realisation of these differences opens up an interesting area for study. While it is unlikely that we can overcome the lack of commensurability between theories which concentrate on different areas and levels of analysis, it does appear from the previous introductory summary that the analysis of power and public policy-making can be approached from two distinct directions. First, it should be possible to discuss *the power of initiation*, by which we mean the ability of government to create and draft policy independently and authoritatively. This level of analysis

emphasises the need to concentrate on the decision-making process of the state and to analyse the extent to which it is open, democratic and subject to bargaining and compromise. The ultimate question here is whether or not the constitutional holders of political power are capable of making the final decisions about the shape of public policy or whether some elite or special interests dominate these decisions.

At another level some theorists are concerned with the problems of policy implementation, or the ability of governments to ensure that their policies are successfully carried out. It has been argued that duly elected governments will not always be able to ensure that their policies will be implemented successfully because they face the potential limitations of the unwillingness of the bureaucracy to carry out its duties, opposition from social and economic interests (trade unions, private companies, financial institutions and individuals) and real socio-economic constraints. Approaching the concept of power and public policy-making analysis from this perspective implies concentration not on the power of initiation, but on the ability of other centres of power, outside the purely political, to veto the actions of duly elected political office-holders. This is, then, the study of *the power of constraint.*

It is difficult, however, to construct a general theory of power or policy-making with approaches which are concerned with very different questions (who decides versus who vetos). Nevertheless by drawing a distinction between these two levels of analysis it is possible for the social scientist to broaden and extend the meaning and understanding of the concept of power. Having first outlined the problem of power in more detail (and shown how this debate is often sterile because writers are drawing conclusions from very different levels of analysis which cannot be used to prove or disprove one another's theories), it will be possible to outline the two levels of analysis to be adopted in this study. The substantive material of the study is the struggle over the state's role in land and property development in Britain since the Second World War.

The basic structure of the study is to indicate first what the major issues have been in land and property development policy, and then to outline the constraints *outside* the political decision-making structure which limit the scope for successful policy implementation. Having examined these generalised constraints in society and economy, the study then tries to illuminate the power of initiation and the power of constraint in this issue-area in post-war Britain. By describing and analysing the process of decision-making for land policy it is possible to understand that Britain's political decision-making structure is relatively pluralistic and that elected governments which command a

majority in Parliament have relative freedom of manoeuvre in policy initiation. This is so even though there are attempts at mobilising bias by the civil service against radical party policy in office. The implication one might draw from this is that the government could therefore do whatever it wished to do. Unfortunately, this is not a correct assumption nor is it a valid interpretation of the structure of power in this issue-area or in Britain generally. The analysis of power cannot end with the process of policy initiation; we must go further because all post-war attempts to restructure the role of the state by the right-wing or left-wing policies have ended in failure and reversal. Right-wing (or *laissez-faire*) policies have generated property speculation and have been questioned ultimately by the very Conservative governments which first implemented them. Left-wing policies aimed at partial or, ultimately, full land nationalisation have generated bottlenecks in land and development and crises of housing construction and public expenditure. To understand why these problems have occurred (and also why governments have eventually returned to consensually based policies of a middle way between the Right and Left) it is necessary to comprehend the power of constraint and the ability of important social, economic and bureaucratic actors to impede the successful implementation of policy.

This study will argue that governments fail to understand the power of constraint and that they generally legislate in ignorance of it. Successful policy initiation is only possible, therefore, if government seeks to co-operate with and co-opt those actors *outside* the political system who have the power to veto the successful implementation of policy. This conclusion is not only to be seen in relation to land and property policy in Britain but can be drawn generally for all government policy-making. This further implies that extreme right- and left-wing policies, even when they can be initiated, are unlikely to be implemented successfully because such policies ignore the veto powers of actors outside the political system. The author argues that, this being the case, the effort of initiation against interests that the government is unable to control is hardly worthwhile, and that a more 'middle-way' approach is the best that governments can achieve in advanced capitalist societies, which have relatively autonomous centres of social and economic power outside the purely political decision-making process.

Structure and process in the analysis of power in public policy-making

One of the major problems with the debate about power, and the best method to use to analyse public policy-making, is that social scientists

do not agree on the questions which are to be analysed. Consequently, because of the dichotomy which exists between those who are concerned with the question of who decides and those concerned with the question who vetos, there is a tendency for social scientists to concentrate on different 'realities' and different levels of analysis. The 'real' world they seek to explain varies according to the epistemological assumptions entailed within each explanatory construct. In very simple language, the concepts utilised are incapable of linkage due to their lack of commensurability. This problem is clarified if we consider the assumptions and focus of analysis utilised by elite and pluralist theories of power and political decision-making.[2]

In constructing its explanatory framework of power and decision-making, the pluralist school concentrates almost exclusively on the *process* by which decisions are made. On the other hand, the elitist school draws its concepts and causal hypotheses from an analysis of the *structure of society*, as well as from an understanding of the mechanisms by which observable conflicts are resolved in that society. As a result, the two schools are analysing very different 'realities', utilising dissimilar concepts, and operating under vastly different assumptions about the nature of power and influence in society.

Pluralist writers concentrate on the mechanisms by which decisions are reached – who participates and who decides.[3] They allow empirical data (the diversity of groups and actors in the policy process) to stand for itself. Having studied a number of decisions in society, and finding that no one group or body appears to be shaping all or most of these decisions, pluralists have concluded that decision-making (and therefore power) structures are flexible, open and relatively democratic. Despite the fact that the pluralist approach lacks any theoretical analysis to guide research, or any real concern with the effects of policy decisions on society, it has been readily accepted because it appears to conform so obviously with the reality of the political system. Most analyses of the decision-making process do reveal a wide diversity of participation and influence, and this diversity has led many writers to conclude that society's power structure must be pluralistic.

Of course, it has also been heavily criticised,[4] because it lacks an awareness of the development of legislation over time.[5] It fails to account for the inequality of representation and participation in decision-making.[6] It ignores the possibility of agenda setting and non-decision-making. It fails to differentiate adequately between types of issues and their importance for different groups or interests in society.[7] Furthermore, it has no way of accounting for the continuity of deprivation in society,

and it fails to appreciate the stratification of society into elites drawn from varied social and economic backgrounds.[8]

It is not surprising, therefore, that elite theorists should disagree so vehemently with the pluralists. Although there are many different elite analyses,[9] they all share one common denominator: they are concerned to show that society is stratified. The initial premise revolves around the assumption that society is structured in a certain way, and that, irrespective of who *appears* to be making political decisions, the reality of who decides is rooted in this initial structural order. Thus, for writers who believe that a social or economic elite exists, evidence that political decisions are taken by, and within, a relatively pluralistic policy process, cannot be taken as a justification of pluralism.[10] Any evidence that pluralism exists in the policy process can be, and is, refuted by assertions that: only some decisions are important to the dominant elites; threatening issues may be kept off the policy agenda; and, in the final analysis, the mobilisation of bias in favour of the elites contains within manageable bounds any potential threat to their position.

There are, of course, obvious problems with the elitist approach: the theory is often constructed prior to research (with evidence being gathered to support the initial argument rather than to disprove it) and most empirical research has tended to discount elite theories, which base their arguments on the correlation between social background factors and the attitudes and behaviour of decision-makers.[11] The main problem with this debate is not the analytic weakness of each approach but, arguably, the fact that the two approaches are not commensurable, because one concentrates on the visible power relations in the process of decision-making while the other looks for causal explanations by emphasising those structural forces in society which predetermine choices in the long term.

Thus, formal institutional approaches to the study of government decision-making (which emphasise the role of elections, Parliaments and Cabinets) are centrally rooted within the *process* paradigm. Such approaches make few assumptions about the structure of power in society, other than to support the view that formal institutional relationships, embedded in the process of decision-making, best approximate the power structure of society.[12] Linked with these 'electoral chain of command'[13] theories are pluralist and organisational theories.[14] Organisational, or bureaucratic, explanations of decision-making emphasise the role of 'standard operating procedures' and 'routines' in constraining the choices open to decision-makers[15] and must be seen within the *process* paradigm of most political science literature.

These process analyses can therefore be clearly differentiated from elite analysis with its structural bias. Likewise, systems analysis, derived from the work of David Easton, is concerned with illuminating the broader forces which operate on and shape political action.[16] But, as Easton has argued: 'my approach to the analysis of the political system will not help to understand why any specific policies are adopted by the politically relevant members of a system'.[17] He is clearly uninterested in *process* and is more concerned with the totality of social relations which may shape decisions in the political system. His approach is centred, therefore, on an elaboration of the 'supports' and 'demands' within the total social system, which the political system must convert into 'outputs' (policies). In this formulation the governmental process is regarded as relatively neutral. As such, Easton's emphasis on socialisation, culture and attitudes, rather than with political ideologies, compromises and institutions, places him squarely in the *structural* approach to political analysis. Unfortunately, his structural method is primarily descriptive, and is mainly concerned with explaining how complex social systems survive and regulate themselves rather than with illuminating the structural properties of power and policy-making.

This criticism cannot reasonably be directed at Marxist approaches. Starting from an analysis of the dominant mode of production, Marxist approaches seek to prove that the ownership and control of the means of production ensure the dominance of social, political and economic decision-making. Although, in recent years, Marxist writers have moved some way from this over-determinist approach,[18] their emphasis on the relationship between the ownership and the control of the means of production places them centrally in the structural approach. The goal of Marxist theorists is not to illuminate the intricacies of the policy process as such but to reveal the constraints placed on autonomous action of political decision-makers by the needs of the dominant mode of production. At its most extreme, politics and process in this formulation must be merely superstructure and largely irrelevant to the shape of the decisions which must eventually be taken.[19]

The dilemma over *structure* and *process* has, however, also been clear in recent Marxist writings. The traditional assumption of Marxist writers has been that *structure* and *process* were indivisible. The Ruling Class dominated the social and economic systems by their control of the means of production, and were also able to control political decisions, either by direct representation (as Cabinet Ministers, MPs or top civil servants), or indirectly through economic or moral pressures (crises of business confidence). The proponents of this view have been labelled

'State Monopoly Capitalist' theorists.[20] More recently, theorists of an Hegemonic Ruling Class have accepted the dominance of Monopoly Capital, but argue that the orthodox interpretation of the role of the state is partial. The state should be seen not only in terms of formal institutions but also in terms of the family, school, trade unions, parties, the church, the media, the arts and the health service. As such, contrary to orthodox Marxist analysis, the state is not monolithic because each group, institution and organisation has its own autonomy, and value systems are polycentric in a relatively pluralistic system. Thus 'Ruling Class' domination is perpetuated through the unequal competition between different ideologies. Both the masses and groups in society accept the ideology of the dominant political and economic class, so that thought and action is confined within limits acceptable to the 'Ruling Class'.[21]

Clearly, though major disagreements are apparent over the mechanisms of domination, the overall determinism of economic ownership, in the last instance, in controlling policy and process is not questioned in either of these approaches. The location of the owners of the means of production and their beliefs, attitudes and goals is the key to the analysis of public policy, since the political process is subordinate to their interests. Some recent Marxist writings have, however, seriously questioned the centrality of economic determination: Jessop, for one, seeks to update this argument. His view is that in the long term 'Monopoly Capitalism' dominates, but in the short term its goals may be overturned and constrained.[22] His basic argument is that at any moment in time action will be constrained by the 'conjecture' of socio-economic needs and political possibilities. Thus, even though the needs of 'Monopoly Capital' may be crucial, the state is not tied irrevocably to the goals of the owners of the means of production, nor will the working class always lose in struggles with the interests of Capital. In this framework, then, the struggle between class interests over control of the state may result in modifications in state organisations and class relations and practices: change is possible within the constraint of the search for solutions to the problems of capitalist production.

Under this new formulation the Ruling Class does not control or dominate the state, rather the state is itself a field of struggle[23] in which the interests of Capital may well be overturned by reformist and social democratic forces. But problems arise with this attempt to link structural constraints and the plurality of relationships evident in the policy process. Once it is accepted that economic determinism and the Ruling Class no longer dominate the state, and the state becomes merely the

focus for a political struggle in which working-class and reformist interests may dominate, then structural analysis may be superceded by the explanation of short-term compromises in the policy process. This new formulation, therefore, raises the question of whether or not the initial structural property of the approach (economic determinism) has any real meaning any more. To coin a phrase: one may be throwing the baby (Marxist structural analysis) out with the bath-water (economic determinism in every case). Contemporary Marxist writers thus have difficulty in coming to terms with the problem of analysing and linking the study of *structure* and *process*: they face the dilemma of meshing economic determinism in every instance with the eclectic and indeterminate plurality of action in the policy process in individual policy cases. Despite the fact that no general, over-arching theoretical solution is possible to resolve this dilemma, it is suggested here that Steven Lukes' three-dimensional approach to power offers a potential compromise answer.

Two levels of analysis: the short-term power of initiation versus the long-term power of constraint

Lukes has identified three ways of analysing power, which incorporate the distinctions of approach embedded in the structure versus process debate.[24] These distinctions are as follows:

(i) one-dimensional view: A has power over B to the extent that he can prevail over B in formal political decision-making on one or more key issues, where there is direct and observable conflict between A and B over outcomes.

(ii) two-dimensional view: A has power over B to the extent that he can prevail over B in determining the final outcome *and* also what is to count as a formal issue, where there is a conflict of interest over policy preference or sub-political grievances (observable).

(iii) three-dimensional view: A has power over B to the extent that he can prevent B from realising his 'real' interests, or from articulating these effectively, due to the mobilisation of bias resulting from the institutional structure of society.

In the first two views power is seen in visible conflicts of interest between individuals. In this sense it relates to the normal political science paradigm of power in policy-making. Given that process analysis concentrates mainly on clearly visible and observable phenomena and behaviour, and denies that structural constraints can shape policy-makers' actions, these two views are the normal tools of analysis for

political scientists. The third view is distinct because it moves away from clearly visible inter-personal relationships and conflicts, and concentrates on how power is manifest in the way in which social structures (class relationships) or institutional arrangements (the shape and bias of the political or educational systems) conspire to leave certain actors unaware of their 'real' interests. This third view is located centrally within the structural approach to policy, or political, analysis; power is conceived as manifested, not in individual relationships but in the interaction of groups and institutions.

Lukes has appreciated that there are serious epistemological difficulties between power defined in terms of individual actions and power conceived in terms of constraints imposed through the structure of society. The former definition obviously implies *contingency* (scope for 'free will'), while the latter denies contingency by emphasising *determinism* (constraints on freedom for individual actions).[25] Although Jessop has argued that Lukes' answer to this problem is simply to oscillate between contingency and determinism,[26] it would seem that he does offer at least a way forward for the policy or power analyst who wishes to understand the relative influence of structural and process variables on policy formulation. Lukes argues that the 'real' world is structured within certain limits by social and institutional arrangements, but that the constraints imposed by these structural properties leave gaps within which individuals can choose to act in conditions of relative freedom.[27] By this means he is able to maintain a belief in 'free will' and also in 'social determinism'.

This appears to be useful because a partial solution to the structure versus process dilemma may be arrived at by using Lukes' differentiation to draw a *temporal* distinction between methods of analysis. This is evident if we compare our dichotomous approaches: structural theories emphasise the constraints imposed on social and political interactions in the long term; process theories concentrate, almost exclusively, on short-term consequences and relationships. The benefit of making a distinction between long- and short-term influences in policy analysis, however, is that it allows one to appreciate the insights of both structural and process explanations and to develop two levels of analysis of power.

It is clear that society is structured: 'life-chances' are not equally distributed; 'winners' and 'losers' for material, physical, social and political rewards are plainly visible;[28] certain groups, actors and institutions have a predominant influence in social and political decision-making; and the search for profit (though not unfettered by governmental restraints) is still an important force underlying social and political

decision-making. This latter point should not be ignored because, even if a determinist or structuralist Marxist view is not adopted, the search for profit in Western societies, and the consequences of changes in the mode of production and circulation of capital, may impose important constraints on the possibilities available for government action.[29]

If we accept Lukes' differentiation of power and the long-term view of structural constraints presented here, it is also likely that all issue-areas in a society will have structural constraints which limit policy options. In order to understand, therefore, why certain policies are decided upon rather than others, and also the limitations of effective government intervention into areas of society, the structure of the policy or issue-area must be clearly defined. This implies describing the dominant modes of production and exchange, the major institutional and political actors, the unorganised and politically inarticulate (whose realisation of their own best interests is perhaps underdeveloped), the ideological predispositions, and the existing policy programmes and practices within each issue-area. Only by this means is it possible to appreciate the *structural limits* within which governments (of whatever persuasion) must operate. The delineation of these constraints is analytically and temporally distinct from the discussion of the compromises and power struggles within the policy-making processes itself. This is true, if the temporal distinction is held too for analytic purposes, even though the two are not totally separate in 'reality'. It is obvious that constraints may change in the long term, and even though this may be due to changes in methods of production or losses of profitability, it may also be due to the effects of group or government actions in the policy process.

This is a crucial caveat and one that is central to the recent critique of structural Marxism. E. P. Thompson has argued that this new Marxism (associated with works of Althusser, Balibar and Poulantzas) is essentially reductionist because, like the earlier 'Stalinist economism', it assumes that there is no meaningful autonomy for political structures.[30] He also suggests that structural Marxism is misguided, mainly because Marx and Engels only developed their analysis to include an abstract theoretical system, which they defined as 'Capitalism'. This did not extend to the analysis of 'Capitalist Society', with its social, political, ideological and cultural relationships; their analysis only illuminated an idealised mode of production which had not (and arguably has never) been fully formed in *any* society.[31] For Marx and Engels, therefore, the needs of 'Capitalism' were not, as Althusser and Poulantzas argue, always determinant in the 'last instance' at all. Rather 'Capitalism' was an abstract theoretical system, with its own laws and needs as a mode

of production (viz. search for profit and the need to accumulate capital to reproduce the conditions of division of labour to ensure the creation of further profit, etc.), which, while having a *major* role in shaping political and social structures, could also be shaped by political action and class struggle.

Thus, whereas 'Capitalism' has definite needs, it is not inevitable that these needs will be met at all; and only by the analysis of the historical development of the capitalist mode of production in specific societies is it possible to determine whether or not capitalist development has been unfettered, or whether it has been constrained by other modes of production (viz. feudalism and land ownership) or by working-class (Labour Party and trade union) activities. It is not axiomatic that the goals of the capitalist mode of production will always be determinant, nor that 'Capitalism' as a system of production or as a society of social and political relations has not changed substantially since the nineteenth century. This in no way invalidates the use of the Marxist framework (with suitable modifications to take account of modern changes and developments in production and social and political reality) as a starting point for analysis.[32] It does, however, counsel caution in assuming any inevitable relationship between the needs of capital reproduction and governmental policies or even power structures in society. Constraints are not immutable: they are likely to change due to the effects of economic, social and political interaction.

Structural limits on political action do not, therefore, arise simply out of the needs of 'Capitalism', although they may in part. On the contrary, the way in which the capitalist mode of production has been introduced into different societies has varied. In some societies (like the USA) it is possible to argue that the capitalist mode was more unfettered than in others (like Britain) where the monopoly mode of production was relatively slow to develop even though the initial move to capitalist development came very early. Furthermore, it is also true that working-class and traditional landed interests have acted as significant obstacles to the creation of a fully integrated and dominant capitalist system in some societies. This is certainly the case in British society, where the autonomy of the financial sector, historically involved in trading rather than productive relations, has acted as an additional restraint on the full dominance of the domestic productive sector.[33] As result the needs of the primary productive–capitalist sector in Britain have always been constrained economically, politically and socially. As E. P. Thompson has argued, however, it is the elaboration of *these* historical relationships and compromises which form the base for the elaboration of the

long-term structural limits on policy-making. It is not a reductionist emphasis on the needs of an idealised 'capitalist' system of production that should concern us, but more the historical experience of capitalism's elaboration within British society.

In this sense, then, the structure of society, or an issue-area within it, and not simply the needs of capitalism, will set limits on the scope for innovation by governments in the long term. This is another way of saying that governments are not able to achieve everything that they may ideally desire. For instance the Conservative government (between 1970 and 1972) and the Labour government (between February 1974 and July 1975) found that the economic policies they desired and those possible in practice were not the same. The main reason for the failure of their respective, if distinct, policies was that market participants (trade unions, manufacturers and financial institutions) did not behave as they were supposed to. In other words, the market in Britain has a structural relationship or logic which constrains and limits the scope for successful policy implementation even though, in the short term, governments may have the opportunity to initiate policy relatively freely. An inclusive approach to the study of public policy-making and power must therefore not only concentrate on the short-term bargains and compromises within the political decision-making process, in which the power of policy initiation is the paramount concern, but should also study the implementation stage, to understand the effectiveness of alternative centres of social, bureaucratic and economic influence which may have the power of constraint in the long term. Both levels of analysis are necessary if we are to understand fully the freedom of manoeuvre of democratically elected governments and, ultimately, the locus of power in capitalist societies.

Before analysing British land and property policy from both of these perspectives a short digression on the analysis of policy-making and power in Britain is in order. This is necessary for two reasons. Firstly, a study of the literature on this subject clearly shows the way in which authors have failed to take account of these two perspectives. Secondly, it is the intention of this work to draw a number of conclusions about the need for more realism in British policy formulation by political parties and governments. This need must also be seen, furthermore, in the context of the adversarial nature of post-war British politics and the rise of the SDP–Liberal Alliance.

British adversary politics, social democracy and the analysis of power and public policy-making

The debate about whether governments have power to influence all the policy decisions which they might desire, or whether they are constrained, is evident in British social and political science writing. Recent studies of the role of government in Britain, by both elite and pluralist writers, have concentrated heavily on the pluralistic nature of the decision-making system and the relative independence of governments to decide on policy for themselves. This model is normally associated with *the adversary politics thesis*, made famous by S. E. Finer;[34] the basic argument here being that, in Britain, political parties do take power and are able to initiate policy freely as they would wish, but that they base their policies on ideological prejudices and ignorance of the real socio-economic circumstances of the world. This in turn leads to poorly formulated policy and a failure of impetus and direction in government, as the state continually confronts crises of its own making. The conclusion is that only a change in the adversarial system of government, in which the two major parties confront one another, would result in less policy failure and more policy continuity. The chosen solution is normally the creation of a third political force through electoral reform which would (in the guise of the SDP–Liberal Alliance today) result in continuous coalition government and relative policy stability on non-ideological grounds and on the basis of consensus rather than class conflict.[35]

Set against this extreme view of the adversarial nature of British politics is a whole generation of social (mainly political) science writing which has doubted the pre-eminence of the elected government in decision-making. This school of thought, while still concentrating heavily on the government's ability to initiate policy, can however be further differentiated in two distinct factions.

On the one hand are, mainly political, science writers who argue that the government governs but that, because the political system is pluralistic, then pressure groups are able either to shape or, in some cases, dictate to the government of the day. The list of writers in this school is immense and a sample of the more seminal is all that is possible here. Samuel Beer, C. J. Hewitt, Wyn Grant and David Marsh, Anthony King and Samuel Brittan are typical of this particular view even if they do not always totally agree.[36] Beer and Hewitt argue basically that the government must listen to pressure from external groups which therefore have political influence, but that it is the government which has ultimate power in policy initiation because it decides what policy compromises